



IDOC Garden Program Expands to Reach More People

By Evie Allen, By Benjy Jeffords Jul 18, 2014

VIENNA -- The Illinois Department of Corrections distributes fresh vegetables to food pantries and schools across Southern Illinois, thanks to the inmate garden program in Vienna. It's been so successful that last year they decided to expand.

Springtime brings a new sound for inmates at the Dixon Springs Impact Incarceration Program. Female prisoners grow and maintain a five acre garden on land donated by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

"It's very structured. It's very disciplined," says correctional officer Penny Poole.

The garden has more than doubled in size in the last year. The inmates grow dozens of different fruits and vegetables, like peppers, beans, tomatoes, and squash.

Correctional officer Penny Poole has overseen the garden the last five years.

"I'm proud of them and their accomplishments. I may have guided them and helped them but it's really theirs."

She says this is a new experience for most of the women. Inmate Orozco had never gardened before. She says she's learned discipline and patience.

"When you see the outcome of it, it just kind of makes you feel really proud of yourself." As a bonus, the fruits of their labor are helping even more local groups.

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"It makes me feel a lot better knowing that what I'm doing and what effort I'm putting into it is actually going towards a really good cause," says Orozco.

Once it's harvested, picked and sorted, it's ready to be donated. One of the new drop off sites is this year is Herrin House of Hope, and a donation like this couldn't have come at a better time.

"We get to save so much money from buying vegetables locally," says director John Steve. House of Hope Director John Steve admits it's been a shaky first year for the soup kitchen. And any assistance goes a long way.

He has a personal message for the gardeners.

"They are affecting lives every single day, so I want to thank them truly."

IDOC officials look to deliver produce to the Herrin House of Hope weekly. The Impact Incarceration Program is a 120 day program that replaces a 1 to 8 year sentence for non-violent offenders.